Philemon 1-21  16th Sunday after Pentecost  Sept. 3, 1989

There is one word that will send me scurrying through the fine print most every time I see it. And I see it often, most every day when I open my mail, or go to the grocery store, or listen to the TV. When I see that word I know that somewhere there is a hook, a catch, something that will sooner or later take money from my pocket and put it in anothers. The word as I'm sure you have guessed is free.

Free reading bulb, the display at K Mart shouted, when you buy two sixty watt bulbs at the regular price. But when I walked one aisle over I found those same sixty watt bulbs to be priced at a dollar and a half less.

Free shampooing of your carpet, the caller assured, but he neglected to tell me the shampooing would be accompanied by an hour long salespitch for a new vacuum.

Reckless Recordings  God gives his love to you, for free, in Jesus Christ. You are saved by grace. a gift. That's what I say to you week after week. Am I like all the rest? saving the conditions for the small print?

This morning it would certainly seem so. For our Lord speaks about what it takes to be his disciple. If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sister, yes and even his own life he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not renounce all that he had cannot be my disciple. Grace? Free? a gift of love in Christ? Jesus words make it sound as if we are going to pay the whole cost. Everything.

Some churches are very explicit about the costs of discipleship. One No drinking, no dancing, giving 10% of all their income. Do they ask too much? Or not enough? Why only 10%? Why only drinking, dancing? Jesus said whoever does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. All.

A man by the name of Philemon found out about what a very long time ago.

Philemen was a resident of Colossae, one who heard the apostle Paul preach
There was a man named Philemon. Through the Apostle Paul's preaching he believed in Jesus Christ. He learned how Christ had died for him, forgiven him. Promised him given him the promise of eternal life. He was a man filled with love for Christ, and for all his brothers and sisters in the faith.

Philemon had a slave. He owned this slave named Onesimus, just as you or I might say we own a chair or a house or a dog or cat. His slave was not a Christian, I suspect he did not even regard his slave as a person. Just a slave, another object, possession.

Onesimus, the slave, ran away, ran to Rome, found his way to Paul whom he must have seen and heard in Philemon's home. Where he heard what Paul preached, he believed, he was baptized.

After training him, nurturing him in the faith, Paul sent Onesimus back to his owner, along with the letter that is our second lesson today. What would be the cost of believing in Jesus Christ for Philemon? Paul makes some strong hints. He writes: If you consider me your partner, receive Onesimus as you would receive me. Receive the slave as he would receive his honored pastor. Receive him, no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a beloved brother.

Under Roman law Philemon had the right to do whatever he wished with his slave, beat him, starve him, torture him, kill him. Under the rule of Christ Paul suggests that Philemon might do something startlingly new: receive his slave as a beloved brother. And in so doing renounce a valuable possession.

We do not know what Philemon did, though sitting where we sit in history it seems obvious what was right for him to do. To release his new brother in the faith from slavery. It is obvious to us that believing in Jesus should have been very costly for Philemon, now Christ might have changed how Philemon saw himself and his world.

Today Thursday afternoon, I saw a black man get out of his car and enter the convenient store at the Landings. I began to memorize his license plate, and watch the store for trouble. I did it without thinking or planning.
Black man, my mind says crime. Just as Philemon's mind said, Possession when he heard the name Onesimus. Everyone of you knows as I tell you what I was thinking in that moment last Thursday, what might be the cost of my believing in Christ, what sort of a change faith in Christ might bring with it.

Or another example. We were role playing in my class last spring. I was playing the part of a husband who worked forty hours a week, a woman pastor was playing the part of my wife who had a job as an executive in a major corporation. We were in counseling. She talked about how her career demanded she put in fifty, sixty hours a week. I talked about the children. And as I heard her the demands of a job, I began to feel very superior to her, very righteous, for she was a woman, not doing what women had been created to do. Suddenly I realized she was saying all the things that I have said so many times about work and time away from family. I realized I carry in my heart different rules for men and women. Will faith in Christ lead me to renounce them?

I was in class, role playing a situation in which I was married to a woman who was working fifty and sixty hours a week. I was complaining, the children need more time with their mother. At first the role playing was a game, but then it became intensely serious. The conflict was male and female, I wanted her to fit into the place where women belong. Suddenly in that role playing situation it was very clear to me that I carry in my heart the idea that men should be able to do as they please, but women are created to serve. Yet I know that in Christ it is not like that at all.

Christ died for you. I speak that promise trusting that whether you who hear it are black or white, rich or poor, male or female, slave or free, that those words were meant for your ears, for your heart. I say, Christ died and was raised for you knowing that all who believe become one with me in Christ. Brothers, sisters. Loved. Day after day we are learning what
that might mean, free, when I declare to you that the love of God for you is free in Jesus Christ, forgiveness is free, eternal life is free, you are free in faith. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. When that grace grasps hold of your heart, who knows what it will cost you? Maybe food for your brothers and sisters in need, or your words and witness to those who have never heard of Christ. Maybe a transformation of the way you have seen your world and yourself. Once God sought to work such a transformation in a man named Philomena, now he is working such a transformation in you.